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the Heart':
Disembodied
Capitalism and
the Foreclosure of
Bodily...

May 2005

‘The Pocket and the Heart’: Disembodied Capitalism and the Foreclosure of Bodily

Suffering in *Life in the Iron Mills*

by

Sarah K. Lanius

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

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in

English

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Date

Thesis Advisor

Chairperson of Department

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Abstract

Rebecca Harding Davis's 1861 novella *Life in the Iron Mills* stands out among its contemporaries not only because of its class-consciousness, but also because of the fact that it addresses the psychological interiority of its working-class characters and locates their psychic trauma as a product of the developing capitalist economy. Drawing on Elaine Scarry's pivotal study of embodiment, as well as the bodily politics of antebellum sentimentalism, I suggest that the female figures of the novella are dissociated from their own bodies and appropriated as vehicles for a male suffering that is ineluctably connected to their (limited) participation in the system of capitalism. I argue that Davis uses this appropriation of female bodies to critique sentimentalism as the primary means to social change and to examine the ways in which capitalism shapes human subjects. Ultimately, this paper proposes that the American Dream—as it exists in Davis's novella—is injurious to the working-class man because it promises him the opportunity to shape his subjectivity, but forecloses that possibility by demanding the erasure of his labor.

Published at a tumultuous time in American history—between the South’s secession and the outbreak of the Civil War—Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills* represents, through its conflicting literary styles, the ambivalence and uncertainty that surrounded issues of class formation. In her 1861 novella, Davis combines elements of both a waning sentimentalism and an emerging realism in order to challenge her society’s treatment of the developing class structure. Although critics have recognized the work’s call for an increased understanding of the plight of the working class, they have largely overlooked the particular kind of pain that Davis makes manifest. Nicholas Bromell notes that work in the antebellum period “was understood primarily by way of a distinction between manual and mental labor, which in turn rested upon an assumed dichotomy of mind (and soul) and body” (7). The class system of the period was predicated upon this dichotomy. Just as the mind was privileged over the body, mental labor granted the upper and middle classes privilege over the working class, whose labor was situated solely in the realm of the bodily.

Life in the Iron Mills challenges the mind/body dichotomy on which the antebellum class system rested. Davis’s novella articulates not only the bodily pain of the working class, but also the mental/psychic trauma of their lives in the iron mills. The working-class protagonist of the story, Hugh Wolfe, exists in the liminal space between the privileged mental realm of the upper-classes and the pure physicality of working-class existence. As an artist, his creativity grants him a mental capacity above that of the other workers—the ability to represent the body entails the capacity to distance oneself from that body. Hugh, however, is unable to deny his physicality completely in order to climb

the economic ladder. Therefore, he displaces his psychological suffering onto other bodies: in an effort to exercise mental control over the physical, he attempts to render his mental pain material by displacing it onto the female body—via the deformed Deb, the statue of the korl woman, and, to a lesser extent, the passing mulatto woman. Through Hugh's appropriation of female bodies, *Life in the Iron Mills* reifies the unnamed pains of living in a capitalist society that requires its subjects to be disembodied. By focusing on a working-class suffering that is dissociated from the body, Davis's novella critiques the workings of sentimentalism and demonstrates the ways in which the growing capitalist economy foreclosed its hopeful possibilities.

In the opening pages of *Life in the Iron Mills*, the narrator refers to the reader as an "amateur psychologist" and asks her¹ audience to make a judgment about the "case" of the iron workers (12). Davis's reference to psychology is by no means accidental, for, ultimately, what the novella asks readers to contemplate is not only the economic and physical oppression of the working class, but also the psychological effects of such oppression. Although the narrator claims that she is unaware of her reasons for telling the "half-forgotten story of this Wolfe more than that of myriads of these furnace-hands," an analysis of the motif of embodiment in the novella makes Hugh's uniqueness quite apparent: surrounded by the sheer physicality of the other workers—their "skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes"—Hugh is more than mere body (14, 12). The description of Deborah that begins Hugh's story sets up the binary opposition between mind and body that is carried out in the novella through images of physical pain

¹ Although the narrator's gender is never explicitly noted, several critics have identified her as the same gender as the author. For the sake of consistency, I will refer to the narrator with female pronouns throughout this paper.

that represent psychological pain. A grotesquely embodied woman, “almost a hunchback,” Deb is identified by her physical deformity (17). Her embodiment is connected to her status as a worker, as her “thwarted woman’s form” makes her “fit to be a type of her class” (Davis 21). Deb’s body is a clear text of class suffering, a representation of the most basic kinds of pain: “She was hungry—one could see that easily enough” (17). However, because her subjectivity is rooted in the body, Deb is unable to express any suffering that is not of an immediately physical nature:

Deeper yet if one could look, was there nothing worth reading in this wet, faded thing, half-covered with ashes? no story of a soul filled with groping passionate love, heroic unselfishness, fierce jealousy? of years of weary trying to please the one human being whom she loved, to gain one look of real heart-kindness from him? If anything like this were hidden beneath the pale, bleared eyes, and dull, washed-out-looking face, no one had ever taken the trouble to read its faint signs: not the half-clothed furnace-tender, Wolfe, certainly. (21-22)

While the narrator’s questions seem to emphasize Deborah’s pain by calling attention to the fact that Hugh has spurned her love, this reading only hints at a *possible* interiority. Deb’s interiority is made accessible to readers through questions and hypothetical statements—signs of uncertainty. Thus, Deb’s body makes pain visible, yet her own innermost sufferings remain invisible. She becomes a text of pain written on by the harsh conditions of life in the mills and the hard-hearted furnace tender who refuses to acknowledge her pain and sympathize with her.

Inasmuch as Deb lives for Hugh and aims to alleviate his suffering—she is first introduced bringing his dinner to the mills so he won’t starve—she becomes the embodiment of his pain. The pain she feels as a result of being neglected points to Hugh’s superiority and emphasizes his difference from the other workers that populate

the mill. Deb understands that her grotesque physicality, which makes her the apotheosis of working-class suffering, is the obstacle that separates her from Hugh:

She felt by instinct, although she could not comprehend it, the finer nature of the man, which made him among his fellow-workmen something unique, set apart. She knew, that, down under all the vileness and coarseness of his life, there was a groping passion for whatever was beautiful and pure,—that his soul sickened with disgust at her deformity, even when his words were kindest. (22-23)

Deborah vaguely realizes that Hugh's disdain for her is, among other things, a result of his desire to transcend his life in the mills by disavowing its materiality. Hugh's rejection of Deb, then, suggests his rejection of working-class materiality as a whole. Therefore, her pain is indicative of his interiority in that by rejecting Deb (the representative of the working class), Hugh demonstrates that he is, ostensibly, superior to that class.

While the monstrous figure of Deb epitomizes working-class suffering and represents the idea that the mill workers are mere bodies, unable to transcend their physicality through mental exertion, Hugh is able to distance himself from his body—to a certain extent. Unlike the other mill workers, Hugh is not entirely defined by his labor, for he lacks the well-defined muscles of the manual laborer. In fact, his figure is rather frail and womanish: "Physically, Nature had promised the man but little. He had already lost the strength and instinct vigor of a man, his muscles were thin, his nerves weak, his face (a meek, woman's face) haggard, yellow with consumption" (24). Although the narrator's description of Wolfe's body emphasizes its feminization, the passage also highlights the ways in which Hugh fails to embody his working-class status. As Mark Seltzer notes, the depiction of Hugh's body as feminized creates a disconnect between his body and his identity:

What seems central here is not exactly the cross-gendering of Wolfe but his hesitated or hybrid identity; that is, the manner in which such a cross-naming and cross-gendering makes it impossible merely to derive identity from the natural body or merely to separate identity from the body. Wolfe's hybrid form, male and female at once, is floated in relation to the hybrid form that makes this "one" a "symptom of the disease of their class" (23). Wolfe's gender and Wolfe's class are thus rewritten in terms of a paradoxical relation between the body and its representations. (467)

Hugh, then, is neither completely masculine, nor completely feminine: he is a man, despite the effeminacy of his body, yet "he was known as one of the girl-men: 'Molly Wolfe' was his *sobriquet*" (24). According to Seltzer, this ambiguity calls attention to the fact that Hugh's identity is not derived solely from his body (which is feminized), but neither is it completely separate from that body (hence his feminine nickname). As Seltzer notes, the hybridization of Hugh's gender is related to and indicative of the hybridity of his class status: although he is a member of the working class, his effeminate body does not classify him as such. Wolfe's body is weaker than those of the other members of his class, whose strong bodies reflect the physicality of their labor; nevertheless, the separation of identity from the body actually serves to elevate him in the economic system. Because his identity is not rooted solely in his body, Hugh has the opportunity to transcend his working-class status.

Hugh's ambiguous embodiment is linked to his mental labor, which, as Seltzer notes, allows him to represent, rather than merely experience, his bodily sensations. Drawing on the mind/body dichotomy that dominates the novella, the narrator observes that, according to the other mill workers, Hugh's mental efforts diminish his physical capabilities: "...he was no favorite in the mill: he had the taint of school-learning on him,—not to a dangerous extent, only a quarter or so in the free-school in fact, but

enough to ruin him as a good hand in a fight” (23-24). Education, therefore, distances Hugh from his own body by elevating him above it—albeit to a limited extent.

Art functions in a similar way, allowing Hugh to move beyond the physical realm and develop an inner, artistic self. Through art, Hugh displaces his suffering onto other bodies in order to further distance himself from his working-class physicality: the art becomes an expression of his pain and, in a way, suffers for him. In other words, Hugh’s efforts at sculpture constitute an attempt to move beyond the bodily realm by exerting control over the body. Deb, however, does not have the luxury of viewing her pain as potential art. As Andrew Silver observes, the novella “begins by emphasizing Deb’s dispossession, permanently dismissing both aesthetic pleasure from her pain and picturesque novelty from her suffering. No metaphor can dispel the pain of the scene for Deb: the mills will not be displaced by literary comparison” (105). The narrator calls attention to this lack of artistry as Deb journeys toward the iron mills: “Perhaps, if she had possessed an artist’s eye, the picturesque oddity of the scene might have made her step stagger less, and the path seem shorter; but to her the mills were only ‘summat deilish to look at by night’” (19-20). Deborah cannot envisage the suffering of her class or the horrors of the mills as artistic or aesthetic subjects not because she is simply less talented than Hugh; rather, she does not see artistic possibility in pain because she is that pain—suffering reified as deformity.

Deb’s inability to see the mills as anything other than they are further underscores the fact that she is part of the physical realm—a facet of the mills, rather than an autonomous subject. Hugh, on the other hand, has the ability to represent the material

reality of the mills as something other than ugly and oppressive and, as a result, to produce the possibility of transcending that reality. As the narrator observes, “God put into this man’s [Hugh’s] soul a fierce thirst for beauty,—to know it, to create it; to *be*—something, he knows not what,—other than he is” (25). Unlike the other starving workers, Hugh is not only physically thirsty, but also figuratively thirsty—for beauty. Significantly, the narrator connects Hugh’s desire for beauty with his desire to “be something...other than he is,” suggesting, again, the transcendent possibilities of art. For Hugh, then, art functions as a way to recreate himself and, as the figure of the korl woman suggests, to transcend his class.

The fact that Hugh sculpts figures from korl—the flesh-colored by-product of production in the mills—emphasizes the connection between his art and the suffering of his class: just as the korl is the refuse left over from ore, the suffering embodied through Hugh’s sculptures is the by-product of labor for the iron workers. The korl woman, despite her gender ambiguity, is associated with the working class in general and with Hugh in particular: “There was not one line of beauty or grace in it: a nude woman’s form, muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with some one poignant longing. One idea: there it was in the tense, rigid muscles, the clutching hands, the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf’s” (32). The narrator’s comparison of the figure to a starving *wolf* suggests a connection between the creation and the artist by punning on Hugh’s last name. Wolfe’s sculpture becomes his surrogate body—one appropriately representative of working-class labor (symbolized by its muscularity) and the resultant pain of that labor (suggested by the reference to starvation).

The hunger of the statue is more explicitly related to Hugh's hunger when Doctor May, one of the upper-class men who observe Hugh's art, questions the realism of the figure as a starving woman. When the doctor explains that the figure looks too strong and asks why Hugh has "given no sign of starvation to the body," the artist explains that the woman is "not hungry for meat" (33). Rather, like its creator, the korl statue has a deeper hunger: Hugh says that she is hungry for "summat to make her live, I think,—*like you*" (emphasis added, 33). Since Hugh longs to emulate the upper-class men—"the mysterious class that shone down on him perpetually with the glamour of another order of being"—he imbues his statue with a desire to live like them as well (27). He displaces his own ambition onto the korl woman, expressing his psychological state through the embodied hunger of the statue. Therefore, the korl woman functions as a representation not only of the working class body, but also of Hugh's yearning to escape from that body and rise above his class.

Finally imprisoned for his complicity in a crime that Deborah committed, Hugh seems unable to resist his working-class fate. He is restrained, literally, by the iron that has figuratively held him down for most of his life: the metaphorical limitations imposed on the working class have been transformed into actual, material restrictions, and his ambition has changed to a desire for freedom. Nevertheless, even after he has been imprisoned, Hugh still struggles to escape from his class: "His ankles were ironed. Not usual in such cases; but he had made two desperate efforts to escape" (51). Unable to free his own body from the shackles, he once again displaces his abstract goal onto a woman's body. As he gazes out of the window at the market, Hugh sees a mulatto girl

walking behind her mistress. As he has done with Deb and the korl sculpture, Hugh uses the mulatto woman's body to express his own interior sensations; in this instance, however, he projects not pain, but his desire for freedom, onto the concrete form of the mulatto woman's body. The narrator describes the mulatto girl through Hugh's perspective as artist: "A free, firm step, a clear-cut olive face, with a scarlet turban tied on one side, dark, shining eyes, and on the head the basket poised, filled with fruit and flowers, under which the scarlet turban and bright eyes looked out half-shadowed" (57-58). The colorful imagery and the detailed description present the girl almost as a painting, and Hugh responds to her as to an aesthetic subject: "The picture caught his eye. It was good to see a face like that. He would try to-morrow, and cut one like it. *To-morrow!* He threw down the tin, trembling, and covered his face with his hands" (58). As Silver notes, Hugh appropriates the mulatto woman as "a canvas of his own frustrated desire" and "transforms her bold vivacity into a still-life, his picturesque eye rendering her living body no different than the brown pheasant described earlier" (109). The mulatto woman, then, comes to embody Hugh's interior desires just as Deb and the korl woman do.

In this instance, however, Hugh also understands the inevitable failure of aestheticization. He projects his desire for freedom (both from prison and from his class) onto the mulatto by focusing on her "*free*, firm step" and the fact that she is laughing as she passes. The reference to the mulatto girl as "free" is ironic, since she is probably less free than Hugh, in spite of his current situation.² The narrator's note that the girl is

² This point is certainly debatable, since in Davis's time, pro-slavery arguments often contrasted the terrible conditions of the wage slave to the conditions of the chattel slave and claimed that the latter were better off.

“following her mistress” emphasizes the discrepancy between her situation and her portrayal as an emblem of freedom (57). As Lucy Morrison notes, “The individuality of the mulatto’s face and the impression of her image on [Hugh’s] mind are responded to again by an artist’s appreciation, but Wolfe curtails his train of thought as he recalls his current situation” (248-49). Thus, the figure of the mulatto woman expressly suggests that Hugh’s treatment of female bodies as artistic subjects constitutes an act of appropriation inasmuch as the women come to represent his innermost pains and desires, rather than their own individual suffering.

Hugh’s longing to escape from his working-class body leads him to displace the abstract concepts of pain, ambition, and freedom onto the bodies of Deb, the korl statue, and the mulatto woman, respectively. This appropriation of female bodies as artistic subjects ultimately fails, however. In the end, in order to transcend the material reality of working-class existence, Hugh must deny his body completely. In a final attempt to transcend the body through representation, Hugh carves into his own body, as though it were korl, and sculpts his death. The narrator’s description of Hugh’s death is, as Seltzer has noted, suggestive of a still life. The stillness of the scene presents Hugh’s dead body as an artistic subject: “...when at last its full tide of white splendor swept over the cell, it seemed to wrap and fold into a deeper stillness the dead figure that never should move again. Silence deeper than the Night! Nothing that moved, save the black nauseous stream of blood dripping slowly from the pallet to the floor!” (61). Through his death,

since they, at least, were fed and boarded by their owners. Nevertheless, the narrator emphasizes that the mulatta was *following* her mistress, which clearly establishes her inability to actively participate in the market: as a wage slave, Hugh at least has the hope of participating in the market—since he can earn capital through his labor, rather than serving *as* capital.

then, Hugh enacts yet another artistic appropriation in an effort to deny his corporeality and move beyond the materiality of life in the iron mills: “Hugh’s suicide both destroys his body—that part of his now dualistic identity that he associates with the working class—and represents the damage that picturesque art does to working-class subjectivity” (Silver 110). Thus, although Wolfe finally succeeds in destroying his body, he must destroy his subjectivity to do so—leaving nothing behind except the female bodies that now represent his mind/soul.

The capitalist economy that dominates *Life in the Iron Mills* provides an apposite backdrop against which to examine Hugh’s disembodiment. Wolfe’s aestheticization and appropriation of female bodies stems from his desire to demonstrate control over the body, while simultaneously erasing his own body from the physically damaging world of the iron mills. His attempt to achieve self-abstraction is consistent with Elaine Scarry’s account of the way capitalism governs bodily relations, for Scarry asserts that success in a capitalist market requires just such an erasure of the physical:

In fact, it is when a person has a relation to the system of production that allows him to survive without risking his own embodied psyche, will, and consciousness in that survival—has a relation to the system of production that frees his psyche, will, and consciousness for arenas other than that system of production—that he *is* a capitalist. (265)

Scarry’s description of a capitalist provides an accurate account of the division of labor that exists in *Life in the Iron Mills*. The upper-class characters (Kirby, Doctor May, and Mitchell) are free to contemplate the philosophical aspects of capitalism and to quote Scripture while debating the ethics of the system; in contradistinction to these abstract capitalists, the mill workers are depicted as easily-identifiable bodies and referred to, in a

classic metonymy, as “hands” (19). For instance, as the upper-class visitors discuss the fate of the lower-classes, their words and ideas—not their bodies—are most present. Davis not only neglects to describe these characters physically, but she also uses vague transitions between their speeches, to the extent that readers may have difficulty determining who is speaking. In the midst of this intellectual debate, Hugh is clearly marked as Other: “At every sentence, Wolfe listened more and more like a dumb, hopeless animal, with a duller, more stolid look creeping over his face, glancing now and then at Mitchell, marking acutely every smallest sign of refinement, then back to himself, seeing as in a mirror his filthy body, his more stained soul” (30). Holding himself up to the mirror of the upper-class, Hugh perceives his body as an encumbrance. Despite his “great blind intellect” and “loving poet’s heart,” he still has the “filthy body” of a working-class wage slave (25). Hugh’s self-conception, then, stems from his recognition of himself as the embodied Other that must be negated and repressed in order for the Subject to exist.

This distinction between the disembodied capitalist and the corporeal worker is, essentially, an extension of the distinction between human subjects and material objects. The definition of a capitalist as an absent presence is similar to Seltzer’s definition of a human subject. He finds that “a hesitated or uncertain relation between bodies or material conditions and identity becomes precisely the measure of having an identity or being a person” (Seltzer 466). Capitalists, then, must renounce the body in order to transcend the level of material objects. Viewed in this context of economic object relations, Wolfe’s aestheticization of the body constitutes an attempt to recreate himself

by defining the body as a material object over which he exerts the God-like control of the creator: “For Marx, material making is a recreation of the body and the body is itself recreated in that activity” (Scarry 256). In other words, Hugh tries to establish a relationship to the capitalist market in which material objects—the bodies of women (real and created)—stand in for him and he is largely absent from the injurious effects of labor.

Invoking the ideology of Karl Marx’s *Capital*, Scarry explains the invisibility of the capitalist as a product of his withdrawal from the object world. In Marx’s formulation, the capitalist is largely absent from the material realm of capitalism because “his suffering, risks, and desires only enter insofar as they are implicit in the swellings and contractions of commodities, in the rates and masses and circulations and stoppings of alternating forms of value, in the accumulation and diffusions, the constancies and vagaries of money and machines and surpluses” (Scarry 264). By investing in an economic endeavor, a capitalist risks his livelihood, but not his life; his involvement in the economic system is mediated by his money, which participates for him. Unlike the worker whose relation to the system of production is situated solely in his body as exchangeable commodity, the capitalist is embodied only to the extent that his capital acts as his proxy:

Capital. It is colossal. It is magnificent. And it is the capitalist’s body. It is his body not because it has come into being through the solitary projection of his own bodily labor, but rather because it bestows its reciprocating power on him, relieving his sentience, acting as his surrogate. He “owns” it—which is to say he exists in such a relation to it that it substitutes for himself in his interactions with the wider world of persons (as it also substitutes for him in Marx’s account of that world). (Scarry 264)

Scarry's analysis of Marx highlights the ways in which the capitalist exists as a disembodied entity, invisible, yet present, within the larger economic system. Art functions in much the same way for Wolfe, allowing him to create substitute bodies to relieve his sentience through representation. Again, Scarry's account of object relations is germane to Hugh's artistic appropriation. She notes that "the material artifact is a surrogate or substitute for the human body, and ... the object is a displacement of sentient pain by a materialized clarification of creation" (Scarry 257). The basis of the capitalist economic system, then, rests on the projection of sentience onto material objects—an act that allows capital to function as a substitute for the capitalist's body. The aesthetic treatment of female bodies in *Life in the Iron Mills* conforms to this model by representing Hugh's interior subjectivity while simultaneously suggesting the possibility of his participation in the capitalist economy.

Hugh's artistic appropriation of female bodies serves as a means of entry into the capitalist marketplace and makes the intersection between art and capitalism a dominant theme in the novella. In fact, as Amy Schrager Lang observes, art "emerges as the real subject of *Life in the Iron Mills*" (142). Several scholars have analyzed Hugh as a figure for Davis herself, noting the connection between Hugh's repressed genius and the author's own stifled creativity.³ I suggest, however, that Davis's treatment of art is more sophisticated and that she uses her main character to critique the relationship between art—specifically sentimental art—and class as much as to reflect her own situation as an

³ Such readings often rely on Tillie Olsen's "Biographical Interpretation" of *Life in the Iron Mills* to make this claim. See, for instance, Adam Sonstegard's "Shaping a Body of One's Own: Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* and *Waiting for the Verdict*" in *Arizona Quarterly* 59.1 (Spring 2004): 99-124, as well as the articles by Andrew Silver, Mark Seltzer, and Lucy Morrison cited elsewhere in this paper.

artist. The fact that Hugh's artistic vision finds expression through the medium of suffering bodies—particularly those of Deb and the kohl woman—aligns his art with the culture of sentimentalism, which relies on the communicative potential of the body.

The sentimentalism that saturated antebellum America, as Bruce Burgett notes, hinged on a distinction between disembodied citizens—active participants in the economic and political realms—and embodied subjects—whose corporeality left them politically powerless (14). According to Burgett's account of sentimental culture, power stems from the ability to control the body by expressing its sensations as abstract and disembodied: "Citizens, in other words, gained political power only insofar as they were able to represent their *local* and *embodied* experience as *universal* and *disinterested* through the mediation of print" (13). Sentimental literature, then, positioned the body of the reader as the mediator between bodily sensation and the social codes it reflected or transgressed. In other words, "the sentimental literary culture of the period relied upon readers' affective, passionate, and embodied responses to fictive characters and situations in order to produce political effects" (Burgett 3). Thus, sentimental art/literature revolved around the production of a sympathetic identification with an artistic subject—a willingness and capability not only to feel what the suffering subject felt, but also to feel for that subject. Drawing on a sentimental tradition that transforms bodily pain into sympathy through the performance of embodied suffering—tears, for example—Davis locates the body as the site of conflict between suffering and its representations: Hugh's artistic appropriation of bodies as vehicles for his suffering, in short, is suggestive of the bodily politics of sentimentalism. However, *Life in the Iron Mills* invokes the culture of

sentiment only to dismiss it as ineffectual in a burgeoning capitalist economy. The novella articulates this dismissal through three potential, yet unrealized, sentimental figures—Deb, the korl woman, and Hugh himself.

Initially, Deb seems to be typical sentimental heroine, whose selflessness drives the plot and usually results in the salvation of the oppressed characters. She first appears safe in the confines of the home, engaging in a self-sacrificing act: she is making dinner for Hugh, even though she, too, is near starving. Later, she even commits a crime for Hugh, taking money from Mitchell in order to help him. Thus, Deb exhibits several characteristics of the traditional sentimental heroine. Indeed, some scholars⁴ have argued that Deb is the sympathetic figure of *Life in the Iron Mills* and that Davis's primary objective is to make the victimization of women visible. The most convincing evidence for this reading lies in the fact that, eventually, Deb is able to leave the mills behind and join a Quaker community (a common trope in sentimental literature). Among the Quakers, far from the capitalist society of the mills, Deb is finally able to express her own emotions through her body: "Slow, solemn tears gathered in her eyes: the poor weak eyes turned so hopelessly to the place where Hugh was to rest" (63). In addition, the Quaker woman who takes Deb in responds to this affective display "like one who speaks from a strong heart deeply moved with remorse or pity" (63). Thus, the two women perform a proper conversion of sentiment into sympathy: Deborah's tears elicit the Quaker's pity. Even in the final moments of the novella, however, what is resurrected is not Deb herself. but her unrequited love for Hugh: "Something is lost in the passage of every soul from

⁴ Sheila Hassell Hughes, for example, argues that the korl statue represents Deb's pain, rather than Hugh's and suggests that Deb's body "incarnates the divine" (125).

one eternity to the other,—something pure and beautiful, which might have been and was not: a hope, a talent, a love, over which the soul mourns, like Esau deprived of his birthright. What blame to the meek Quaker, if she took her lost hope to make the hills of heaven more fair?” (64). Deb’s hope is that she might someday be reunited with Hugh and form a meaningful relationship with him. This hope is irrevocably lost when the narrator notes—significantly, in the very next passage—that only the korl woman has managed to sustain an enduring connection with her creator (the korl statue is kept in Hugh’s old house).

Although Deb is secreted away, safe from her former working-class lifestyle, she has not achieved the fulfillment of her desires. As Jean Pfaelzer notes, Deborah’s relationship to and desire for Hugh overshadows any individual agency she may possess: “Because her subjectivity is defined through Hugh’s desire, Deb is constricted as a romantic subject; her quest is never for autonomous selfhood, but rather for psychological intimacy” (39). Despite her final gesture towards sentimental agency, Deb cannot transcend her association with Hugh or re-create her body in a way that erases his rejection of her. Throughout the story, her body exhibits signs of Hugh’s neglect, her face maintaining its “stupor and vacancy” (22). Thus, as Rosemarie Garland Thomson asserts, “Deb...is at once sympathetic and monstrous, contained finally in the Quaker haven rather than empowered by it” (“Benevolent” 572). Deb, therefore, embodies the qualities of a sentimental heroine, but remains cut off from the transcendent potential of sentimentalism because her love for Hugh outlives her, suggesting that Wolfe, not Deb, is the enduring focus of the narrator’s story.

Like Deborah, the korl woman could be a potential site of sympathetic identification with the working class: both are aesthetic images of suffering bodies, and, as such, they encourage their readers (both inside and outside of the novella) to form a sympathetic identification with them. However, this potential is never fulfilled because the two women have been appropriated as representations of Hugh's pain and are, therefore, dissociated from the suffering that they embody. Moreover, as representations of Hugh's desire to participate in the capitalist economy, the female figures are implicated in the capitalist marketplace. While Wolfe's treatment of Deb is similar to his treatment of material objects, the korl woman provides a more overt example of the way in which capitalist object relations and artistic appropriation coincide. By displacing his frustrated desires—specifically, ambition—onto the korl woman, Hugh imbues the statue with both artistic and economic possibility. The korl woman is not only an artistic representation of pain, but also a potential commodity—a form of capital facilitating Hugh's participation in the capitalist market economy.

Indeed, the upper-class visitors to the mill project onto the inanimate sculpture both the working-class suffering reified through Hugh's artistic talent and the economic possibilities created by that talent. The mill-owner, Kirby, and the town physician, Doctor May, are positioned as opposites in their readings of the korl statue: they represent, respectively, the ideologies of capitalism and humanitarianism—"the pocket and the heart of the world" (38). However, the similarity of their readings suggests the imbrication of the two perspectives and situates art at the center of the debate. Both Kirby and May conceive of class hierarchy in relation to the antebellum binary of mind

versus body, and both acknowledge that Hugh's art deconstructs that binary by depicting the interior, mental trauma of the worker. Nevertheless, both Kirby and May understand their relationship to Hugh—and to the working class in general—as essentially economic; thus, although they gesture toward a sympathetic reading of the statue as emblematic of the problem of class difference, they make no effort to alleviate that suffering.

In Kirby's view, the class system is based on something so primary that abstract concepts—like liberty and equality—cannot subvert it. Therefore, he proposes, paradoxically, the solidification of class boundaries through biology as a way to benefit the working class. This notion of a biological social hierarchy is made manifest through the hypothetical society that Kirby constructs in response to the “terrible problem” that the korl figure masks (34). Kirby's fantasy takes the mind/body dichotomy literally by portraying a world in which working-class men are completely dehumanized—rendered not even bodies, but machines:

“I tell you, there's something wrong that no talk of '*Liberté*' or '*Égalité*' will do away. If I had the making of men, these men who do the lowest part of the world's work should be machines,—nothing more,—hands. It would be kindness. God help them! What are taste, reason, to creatures who must live such lives as that?” He pointed to Deborah, sleeping on the ash-heap. “So many nerves to sting them to pain. What if God had put your brain, with all its agony of touch, into your fingers, and bid you work and strike with that?” (34)

Kirby's final image implies that even Deborah is more than sheer body and suggests that working-class figures are oppressed by their cognizance of their situation as much as by the physical conditions in which they suffer. Thus, Kirby posits a world in which manual labor and consciousness are completely separate. This supposedly sympathetic democratization of labor is actually an extreme form of the mind/body polarity upon

which antebellum class distinctions tenuously rested. As Seltzer notes, “The logic of [Kirby’s] fantasy depends upon what appears as an extension of ideology into biology, an extension by way of a literalization of the familiar notion of workers as hands” (464). By presenting the biological separation of classes as an unrealized ideal, Kirby challenges the value and reality of the mind/body class structure. In other words, his hypothetical portrayal of a world in which workers have no subjectivity suggests that the mill workers are, in fact, more than mere hands and that their suffering results from their (albeit limited) interiority.

Although Kirby acknowledges that the biological foundation of the class structure is tenuous, he does not feel compelled to do anything to alter that system. When May asks him what he will do with talented workers like Hugh Wolfe, Kirby responds by deferring responsibility: “*Ce n’est pas mon affaire*. I have no fancy for nursing infant geniuses. I suppose there are some stray gleams of mind and soul among these wretches. The Lord will take care of his own; or else they can work out their own salvation. I have heard you call our American system a ladder which any man can scale. Do you doubt it?” (34). Kirby acknowledges, then, that his workers may possess subjectivity beyond the realm of physical labor, but he claims that he has no obligation to treat them as thinking subjects. Kirby is the quintessential capitalist, and his sole responsibility is monetary: “I wash my hands of all social problems,—slavery, caste, white or black. My duty to my operatives has a narrow limit,—the pay-hour on Saturday night. Outside of that, if they cut korl, or cut each other’s throats. (the more popular amusement of the two,) I am not responsible” (35). In fact, Kirby positions capitalism as existing outside

of morality and social obligation: “‘What has the man who pays them money to do with their souls’ concerns, more than the grocer or butcher who takes it?’” (35). A true capitalist, Kirby clearly defines his relationship to his hands in economic terms: he has no body with which to register sympathetic affect, only money. Mitchell emphasizes Kirby’s disembodiment through a metaphoric conflation of the capitalist with his capital: “‘And so Money sends back its answer into the depths through you, Kirby! Very clear the answer, too!—I think I remember reading the same words somewhere:—washing your hands in Eau de Cologne, and saying, ‘I am innocent of the blood of this man. See ye to it!’”” (36). Mitchell’s reproving remark calls attention to the way that Kirby situates capitalism outside of moral responsibility.⁵

Mitchell emphasizes the tension between the unfeeling capitalism that Kirby preaches and the (supposedly) more humanitarian response exhibited by May. In fact, he draws May into the debate by calling on his humanitarian sensibility: “‘Now, Doctor, the pocket of the world having uttered its voice, what has the heart to say?’” (36). Like Kirby, Doctor May recognizes that Hugh’s talent undermines the foundation of the class hierarchy; in contrast to Kirby, though, May views the furnace-tender’s artistic talent as potentially liberating, rather than oppressive. In his explanation of the American Dream, May asserts that Hugh’s art has the potential to transcend class boundaries: “‘Do you know, boy, you have it in you to be a great sculptor, a great man?—do you understand?’ (talking down to the capacity of his hearer: it is a way people have with children, and

⁵ In portraying Kirby as the Pontius Pilate of capitalism, Mitchell draws on a very physical allusion to present both the capitalist and the system as pitiless. Pilate claimed innocence of Christ’s brutally physical death, a death that resulted, significantly, in the ultimate transcendence—the transfiguration of the human Jesus into the divine risen Lord.

men like Wolfe,)—‘to live a better, stronger life than I, or Mr. Kirby here? A man may make himself anything he chooses. God has given you stronger powers than many men,—me, for instance’” (37). May’s reading of the statue as emblematic of Hugh’s potential to achieve economic success is benevolent, to a certain extent. As Morrison argues, “May equates an artist’s ability with the ability to be a better person, and confirms Wolfe’s suppressed desire: that he does have the chance to escape from the life in which he is currently confined and that he can alter his existence” (247). However, May’s reading also obviates any affective or economic obligation he may have to Hugh by locating the potential for advancement in art. Instead of affective pity or economic charity, May’s “magnanimous” gift is one of hope and recognition of the false premises of class difference: “Something of a vague idea possessed the Doctor’s brain that much good was to be done here by a friendly word or two: a latent genius to be warmed into life by a waited-for sun-beam. Here it was: he had brought it” (37, 36-37). Although he demonstrates a willingness to assist Hugh, May can offer only a few encouraging words. His reading of the korl statue, then, suggests the possibility of sentimentalism by hinting at his desire to help Hugh change his situation; in other words, May performs a version of social activism that invokes the ideology of sentimentalism, even though it fails to carry that ideology to fruition.

Any potential for a sentimental response is foreclosed by May’s participation in the capitalist system. When Hugh asks May to help him forge a better life for himself, the doctor assumes that the mill-worker is asking for economic assistance and withholds his munificence, saying, “I have not the money, boy” (37). He further emphasizes the

disjunction between his pocket and his heart by suggesting that he actually has been appropriately moved by Hugh's art: "'You know, Mitchell, I have not the means. You know, if I had, it is in my heart to take this boy and educate him'" (37). Doctor May claims that he has responded to Wolfe's art on an emotional level, but that he has failed to fulfill his sentimental obligation—performing the work of sympathy—due to his lack of economic resources. Although he may feel sympathetic toward Hugh, May is unable to express sympathy in any meaningful or effective way because he is disembodied by his position in the capitalist system. As is the case with Kirby, May's only means of relating to the working-class furnace-tender is through a monetary exchange; however, May, apparently, does not have enough capital to convert his emotion into a tangible result. Thus, May's reading of the kohl woman reinforces the novella's dismissal of sentimentalism as ineffective and suggests that the breakdown between sympathy and social action is related to the capitalist economic structure.

Although the mill visitors recognize the kohl woman as a sign of Hugh's difference from the average worker, none of the men are willing (or able) to help Wolfe raise himself above the working class. Kirby, the indefatigable capitalist, throws money to Deb, once again demonstrating that his presence in the mills is felt only through his money. May, despite his empowering speech, says that he does not have the means to help Hugh, and, unable to convert his potentially sympathetic response into an economic one, can offer Wolfe only his outstretched hand and a few parting words of encouragement. Mitchell does even less for Hugh, touching his hat as a parting gesture. While the visitors to the mill instruct Hugh that he may rise beyond the limitations of his

class and become—through his art—like them, they deny him the assistance he needs to achieve these goals. Ultimately, then, they leave him with nothing more than “the phantoms of his heated, ignorant fancy” and “a clear, projected figure of himself, as he might become” (40, 41). In their responses to Hugh’s artistic talent (as reified in the korl sculpture), the upper-class visitors display a nascent sympathy that never develops into a fully-embodied sentimentalism because their ability to engage in sympathetic identification with the working class is hindered by their participation in a capitalist system that requires their disembodiment.

This thwarted sentimentalism dominates the frame of the novella as well, for the narrator suggests the need for a sympathetic response to her working class subjects even as her abrasive tone forecloses that possibility. By conferring an upper-class status on her readers, the narrator invokes the power dynamic of the sympathetic reader of the sentimentalized working-class subject. The discrepancy between the lofty language the narrator uses to address the readers and the descriptions of the lowly setting and characters re-inscribes class difference even as the novella struggles to erase that difference: “the frame tale encourages identification across class lines, invoking sympathy while at the same time distancing the reader from the story’s black and Welsh working-class characters through the use of dialect, foreign phrases, and elevated vocabularies” (Pfaelzer 29). Emphasizing this disjunction, the narrator accuses her readers of being ignorant of the conditions of the mills:

There is a curious point for you to settle, my friend, who study psychology in a lazy, *dilettante* way. Stop a moment. I am going to be honest. This is what I want you to do. I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me,—here, into the thickest

of the fog and mud and foul effluvia. I want you to hear this story. There is a secret down here, in this nightmare fog, that has lain dumb for centuries: I want to make it a real thing to you. You, Egoist, or Pantheist, or Arminian, busy in making straight paths for your feet on the hills, do not see it clearly,—this terrible question which men here have gone mad and died trying to answer. (13-14)

The narrator's agenda, as she articulates it here, is to reify the problem of class stratification ("to make it a real thing"), specifically for the upper-class reader who is disgusted by the fetid physicality of the mills. She presumes that her readers will be resistant to the story and, as a result, adopts a fairly hostile stance. As Lang has argued, "This assault on the reader is, presumably, meant to dislodge us from our position of complacent indifference to the plight of the industrial worker. Self-regard, if nothing else, will lead us to disprove the narrator's charges against us by attending to her protagonist. But ultimately the story offers us no alternative position in which to locate ourselves" (134). Indeed, if readers are to respond to the narrator's story—as the reader of sentimental fiction would—by mobilizing themselves to help the working classes, they are given no acceptable model of how to respond. In fact, the novella seems to shut down any possibility of transforming Hugh's story into political action.

As Wolfe appropriates female bodies as artistic representations, the narrator appropriates his body as the object of her narrative gaze. Her appropriation, however, also fails as a sentimental representation, largely because Wolfe breaks down the dichotomy upon which sentimental embodiment is based. As both worker and artist, Hugh deconstructs not only the binary of mind/body, but also the distinction between the artist and his/her aesthetic subject. Perhaps because Hugh is able to comprehend his situation in his mind, he is unable to render his suffering visible through his own body:

“People going by to church saw only the sickly mill-boy watching them quietly at the alley’s mouth. They did not know that he was mad, or they would not have gone by so quietly: mad with hunger; stretching out his hands to the world, that had given so much to them, for leave to life God meant him to live” (45). Like the churchgoers who cannot read these signs of mental anguish—the mad hunger of not only a starving worker, but also a starving artist—readers are unable to establish a sympathetic identification with Hugh’s body as text precisely because he blurs the boundaries between the subject who suffers and the subjectivity that represents suffering. In doing so, Hugh disrupts the bodily politics of sentimentalism, which, as noted earlier, require a direct connection between the suffering body and the sympathetic reader. The text draws attention away from Hugh’s body, emphasizing instead his interior subjectivity and its displacement onto other figures. Because Hugh is more than just body, readers cannot respond to his suffering solely through their bodies; rather, Davis forces them to struggle with the problems of class stratification and suffering on an intellectual level as well.

The narrator’s ambiguous descriptions of Hugh, as Lang has suggested, disrupt the potential for reading Hugh as a sentimental figure. Lang contrasts Wolfe with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom, the ultimate example of the sentimental male. Unlike Uncle Tom, who is the subject of a daguerreotype, “Hugh Wolfe apparently cannot be drawn at all” (Lang 132). The impossibility of establishing Hugh’s identity by defining the boundaries of his body is connected to his role in the capitalist system of the novella. Again, Lang’s comparison of Uncle Tom and Hugh Wolfe sheds light on the nature of the relationship between economic status and representation. Observing that Wolfe is

excluded from the transcendent possibilities of sentimental representation that govern Stowe's work, Lang wonders "why Davis's figure of the wage slave resists so thoroughly the sentimental treatment to which the chattel slave all too readily lends himself" (133). *Life in the Iron Mills* suggests that the answer to Lang's proposed question—why does Hugh resist sentimentalism?—is connected to the economic language she uses to describe the two contrasted figures.

Hugh is not granted access to the privileges of sentimentalism precisely because he is a wage slave and, as such, he occupies the tense middle-ground of the economic spectrum. He has not attained the ultimate privilege of capitalist disembodiment, but nor is he, like the chattel slave, reduced to the level of material property. Because Hugh is not defined solely by his body, his suffering cannot be represented fully through the body, but neither can he completely disavow his body and its working-class association. Rather, Hugh must appropriate alternate bodies onto which to displace both his class status and the suffering it causes. Ultimately, however, this artistic appropriation fails, leaving Hugh trapped between two worlds: "Hugh's sculpture, suggesting the possibility of transcendence through the freedom of the imagination, has not provided him true freedom, and the prison becomes a symbol of his psychic isolation. His romantic impulse toward detachment has sundered passion from compassion. And hence his alienated self, his artistic self, is incapable of transforming the world" (Pfaelzer 51). The psychic isolation to which Pfaelzer refers is, I believe, the most striking form of suffering inflicted upon the working class.

As the figure of Hugh Wolfe suggests, members of the working class have the capacity to understand their situation and to hope for a better life, but they lack the means to bring about their own salvation. As a result, they end up like Hugh, isolated from both their fellow workers and the upper classes alike, withdrawn from the capitalist marketplace that promised them the opportunity to succeed: “It was market-day. [...] He could see, too, and hear distinctly the clink of money as it changed hands, the busy crowd of whites and blacks shoving, pushing one another, and the chaffering and swearing at the stalls. [...] He was done with the world and the business of it” (54). Hugh’s final moments in jail emphasize the fact that his isolation and his thwarted subjectivity are connected to his ambition to succeed in the capitalist economy—the impossibility of his doing so.

Thus, according to Davis’s novella, the ultimate pain of the working-class man is not physical, but psychic. The gritty realism of *Life in the Iron Mills* points to the ways in which the developing capitalism of antebellum America would separate its citizens so drastically that affective responses would prove futile in the face of economic differentiation. Capitalism, the novella suggests, cannot be adequately represented through the body because its traumatic effects are largely psychological. Thus, *Life in the Iron Mills* attempts to render capitalism visible not through the performance of affect, but through the appropriation of female bodies as sites onto which to displace male psychological suffering. This artistic appropriation invokes the bodily politics of sentimentalism only to critique its workings and demonstrate the inability of sentiment to capture fully the trauma of life in a capitalist society. Whether in the iron mills or outside

of them, neither the pocket nor the heart of the world can produce salvation for the working class; rather, they create a society that leaves human subjects—like Davis's furnace-tender—ultimately thwarted.

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